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ABSTRACT

Critics suggest that ability grouping all too often limits the instructional experience of lower-track students and that students placed in low tracks at a young age may never be transferred to upper tracks where higher-order skills are typically taught. As a result of this growing criticism, schools are increasingly eliminating ability grouping. Numerous alternatives to tracking have been proposed. Perhaps the most common model for detracking schools is cooperative learning, which is typically thought of as a form of heterogeneous grouping. Some schools divide a heterogeneously grouped classroom into smaller groups for reading and mathematics instruction. Other schools have allowed students to sort themselves according to their own interests. Still other schools have merged academic and vocational tracks into a single integrated program. While more research is needed on the specific effects of these efforts to detrack schools, it is evident that changes are being considered in many schools. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

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Alternatives to Ability Grouping: Still Unanswered Questions.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

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ALTERNATIVES TO ABILITY GROUPING: STILL UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Few strategies for organizing education in the United States are as deeply ingrained, or as controversial, as that of grouping students according to ability. Perhaps the most visible form of ability grouping is tracking.

The question at the heart of the tracking debate is how best to educate large numbers of students whose backgrounds and abilities differ widely. Many studies of tracking have found that the practice has little, if any, direct impact on student achievement (Gamoran, 1987; Slavin, 1990; Slavin, 1993). Critics suggest, however, that ability grouping all too often limits the instructional experience of lower-track students to little more than rote drill on basic skills. Further, because mobility between tracks is rare, students placed in low tracks at a young age may never be transferred to the upper tracks where higher-order skills are typically taught.

Recent Detracking Experience

As a result of the growing criticism of tracking, schools are increasingly eliminating it. In a 1993 survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, more than half the schools reported that they had begun to modify their approaches to ability grouping, and only 15 percent reported using traditional tracking mechanisms (cited in Carey, Farris, & Carpenter, 1994).

However, the precise magnitude of detracking across the country is less certain. The same survey found that a full 86 percent of public secondary schools still offered core courses tailored to differences in student ability. Similarly, another study conducted by the Educational Testing Service and the National Urban League (1991) found that even schools claiming not to track often offered math courses clearly reflective of differences in student ability. Indeed, some have suggested that schools in the United States rely on tracking more than schools in any other nation worldwide (Oakes, 1990).

Numerous alternatives to tracking have been proposed. All of them replace practices that sort students according to ability with practices that group them without regard to ability or achievement.

In its simplest form, detracking involves little more than a shift in the makeup of classes. More comprehensive forms of detracking also change the pedagogy and curriculum. For example, programs may consist of interdisciplinary or integrated curricula that is built around a theme. They may also include hands-on projects, attention to social issues, real-world experiences, and involvement in community projects. Such programs often call on teachers to personalize their instruction to meet the needs of individual students and to find techniques that teach study skills and emphasize learning as a process rather than as rote memorization (Wheelock, 1992). Oakes and Lipton (1993) outline some of the hallmarks of such approaches. The strategies:

- emphasize thinking skills and student responsibility rather than memorization of facts;
- treat learning as a complex process;
- provide a context within which to learn facts;
- allow for multiple right answers; and
- are long-term projects.

Detracking and Cooperative Learning

Perhaps the most common model for detracking schools is cooperative learning, where small groups of students work collaboratively on classroom projects. All students in a group learn the same coursework together and share responsibility for the success or failure of their group work. In addition, students learn from each other and support each others' efforts. For the most part, teachers function as guides and senior partners, not as dispensers of knowledge; students may even take on leadership roles. Most cooperative learning projects also emphasize the development of students' social skills, as well self-evaluation by both individual students and groups (Wheelock, 1992; Crosby & Owens, 1993).

Cooperative learning is not itself a grouping model and is, thus, often used in tracked schools as well as in detracked schools (Mills & Durden, 1992). Nevertheless, it is typically thought of as a form of heterogeneous grouping, and its advocates recommend that it be used in heterogeneous settings. They assert that it is the best option for all students, in part because, unlike tracking, it emphasizes active interaction between students of diverse abilities and backgrounds (Nelson, Gallagher, & Coleman, 1993). Further, research by the Massachusetts Advocacy Center (1990) suggests that cooperative learning may be particularly beneficial for African American and Hispanic students.

Critics of cooperative learning as a replacement for tracking suggest that it should not be considered a panacea. If cooperative techniques do nothing more than allow students to work on low-level tasks and worksheets together, they note, the techniques will do little to improve instruction; put bluntly, poor lessons taught cooperatively are no better than poor lessons taught using more traditional methods (Mills & Durden, 1992). Others have suggested that while cooperative learning is valuable in certain situations, it is not always appropriate; it can be more effective, particularly with high-achieving students, when used in conjunction with ability grouping (Nelson, Gallagher, & Coleman, 1993).

Detracking and Within-Class Ability Grouping

Some schools, particularly in the upper elementary grades, no longer use tracking to make student class assignments, but they divide a single heterogeneously grouped classroom into two or three small ability groups for reading or math instruction (Slavin, 1993). These small groups may or may not use cooperative learning techniques. While this practice still requires the sorting of students into different groups for instruction, it may have several advantages over large-scale methods of tracking. The smaller size of the groups makes

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them somewhat fluid, so it is more likely that students will be able to move into higher tracks as their achievement improves. In addition, using small groups may make it possible to tailor curricula and teaching methods more closely to the needs of individual students (Sorensen & Hallinan, 1986).

However, within-class groupings require individual teachers to manage several different groups of students simultaneously, thereby necessitating that some groups of students spend considerable time working alone in their seats while the teacher is working with other groups (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1995).

Detracking and Interest Grouping

Rather than sort students according to assessments of their ability, some schools have allowed students to sort themselves into groups according to their own interests. The most common forms of this type of grouping, which occurs most often in middle and high schools, are magnet schools and schools-within-schools (Fine, 1994). Most research shows that such schools improve student achievement, but critics are concerned that they simply replicate the negative aspects of tracking by "creaming" the highest achieving students into them and leaving lower achievers behind in other schools (Pallas et al., 1995).

Detracking and Restructured Vocational Education

Finally, a growing number of high schools have attempted to eliminate the wholesale tracking of students into discrete vocational and academic tracks by merging the two into a single integrated program, most often with a specific career-related theme. All students take a linked set of classes integrating vocational and academic work, and often work in collaborative groups. The goal of such programs is to prepare all students either to attend college or to move into the world of work following graduation. Although they appear very promising, there has been little solid research into their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Changes in the way students are grouped can radically change the way they are taught in schools across the nation. Few educators agree on the nature of the most effective replacement for ability grouping, however. While cooperative learning has received the most attention, and experience supports it, its effectiveness can be limited if it is simply used to provide low-level lessons in a cooperative setting. Similarly, within-class ability grouping and interest grouping may do little to ease concerns about equity and achievement. That is, within-class grouping may simply replicate the inequities of tracking, but on a smaller scale, while interest grouping may ultimately function as a new form of tracking through its tendency to "cream" the best students into certain programs.

Both proponents and critics of tracking, thus, concede that more research is needed, particularly into the impact and effectiveness of specific detracking efforts. In order to resolve the unanswered questions regarding detracking, Slavin (1993) recommends several directions for such research, including studies of:

- the use of cooperative learning, within-class ability grouping, and other models, specifically in schools that are detracking;
- the effectiveness of other teaching methods, such as mastery learning and mixed-age groupings in heterogeneous settings;
- methods such as individualized studies and supplementary tutoring for helping low-achieving students succeed in high-quality, challenging heterogeneous settings; and
- typical characteristics of both successful and unsuccessful detracking efforts.

—**Gary Burnett**

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